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XIV

THE HISTORY OF A COUNTRY PARSON

> So great was his sanctity while a shepherd, that he was thought worthy of being made a pastor of men: and having been assigned the bishopric of one of the cities in Cyprus . . . on account of his extreme humility he continued to feed his sheep during his incumbency of the bishopric.
>
> SOCRATES
> *Ecclesiastical History*, I, xiii

IN 1891, scarcely more than a decade since the day when the blue and white ensign of the Kingdom of the Hellenes had replaced the crescent of the infidel over the citadel at Trikkala, the wife of the village carpenter in an obscure hamlet amongst the mountains to the westward of Kalambaka gave birth to a son. The carpenter and his family dwelt in a substantial stone house a few paces beyond the village square, where a great plane tree overshadowed the church, dedicated in honour of the Egyptian anchorite Bessarion. Like many families in northern Pindos they spoke not only Greek but also the language of the Tsintsars, the Koutso-Vlachs who come down from the high pastures every autumn with their flocks and herds to winter in the Thessalian plain.

Like their neighbours at Palaiochori the Photis family (for so the carpenter was named) was virtually independent of the world that lay beyond the mountains. They owned a few sheep and goats; the *Kyria* Photis and her daughters spun their own yarn and wove the strong indigo cloth which was made up into *sarka* and *palto* for men and women alike. There was home-baked bread, goats' milk cheese and *yiaourti*, and an occasional lamb roasted on a spit to celebrate a festival; an abundance of rough red wine and the fiery *ouzo* which gladdens the heart of the traveller when the snow lies deep in Pindos. From time to time the carpenter would saddle his pack-animals and make an expedition to Trikkala, returning with an axe or a set of chisels, and dried figs for the children.

Constantinos, as the carpenter's son was duly christened, began to go to the village school when he was seven. Long before this time,

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however, he was familiar with the mysterious drama which was enacted week by week in the little church of St. Bessarion. Sunday by Sunday, festival by festival, the people of Palaiochori—the carpenter (who had a fine voice and was also the chief *psaltes*); his wife and daughters; Makroiannis, who presided over the tavern; the *Kyria* Andromache, who always stood before the royal doors when Papa Athanasi read the gospel of the resurrection at the end of mattins; Papa Demosthenes, who had fought in the old wars and had seen innumerable wonders, had been to America and visited the holy mountain of Athos—all were caught up for a brief space into the life of the heavenly Jerusalem and joined their praises to those of the saints who looked down on them from wall and eikonostasis.

The carpenter's son learned by heart many of the great psalms and hymns of the Church: long passages from the Gospels and from the Old Testament prophecies which were read on the eves of great festivals and during Holy Week. As he grew older and learned to read he would stand among the singers who crowded round the two lecterns every Sunday, and sometimes the parish priest would allow him to climb up the steps of the bishop's throne that stood on the south side of the church and sing the Epistle from a tattered volume printed at Venice towards the end of the eighteenth century. On the eve of a festival he would come running from the saw-mill or his father's workshop when Papa Athanasi clanged the two bells which hung in the branches of the plane tree beside the church, to take his place among the singers. He learned to find his way about the complicated service-books and to sing the ecclesiastical chant with a confidence which rivalled that of the chief *psaltes* himself.

When Costas left school he went to work with his father. He was already well versed in the rudiments of his trade, and by the time he was called to the colours in 1913 he was a proficient craftsman. He served in the army for three years and had two further spells of soldiering—from 1917 to 1919, and again, in the disastrous campaign in Asia Minor, from 1921 to 1923—before, released from the army at last, he came home to Palaiochori and married a girl from the neighbouring village of Krania. The marriage was blessed with three children: two boys, born in 1924 and 1934, who were christened Leonidas and Athanasius respectively, and a daughter born in 1931.

Meanwhile there was work enough for the village carpenter besides begetting children; even when he was not at his bench there was ground

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159 793 to be tilled and seed to be sown and a score of sheep to be cared for, as well as an occasional expedition to Trikkala. Fourteen years slipped by: there were good harvests and bad; once a blight fell on the vineyards and once the bishop rode out from Trikkala and preached in the village church where, since the death of his father, Constantinos Photis had been the chief singer. The people of Palaiochori heard few sermons; they worked and prayed, sinned and repented; danced in the square on warm Sunday afternoons and argued about the doings of the great world beyond the mountains as they sipped their ouzo in the village tavern.

In 1937 the parish priest died. The elders of the village debated the question of a worthy successor—and who more suitable than the carpenter, Constantinos Photis? A man universally respected among his fellows for his uprightness and integrity; who knew the intricacies of the Venetian service-books with a familiarity such as could come only from long experience. Polycarp, Metropolitan of Trikka and Staghi, willingly acquiesced in the village's choice of a pastor, and Constantinos Photis, the carpenter, went off one day to Trikkala (after a short stay in a nearby monastery) and returned clad in black gown and *kalymmafchion* as 'Papa Costas'. Back in Palaiochori, life went on much as before. The village priest now wore a cassock of the same indigo homespun in which he had been clad from infancy. There was the same pattern of feast and fast, of eucharist and office; and though an occasional wedding or funeral now broke the regular rhythm of the carpenter's life and the former *psaltes* had a different liturgy to perform on Sundays and holy days, it was one with whose least detail he had long been familiar. The tools in the workshop were not permitted to rust, and the vegetables and the vines, the twenty sheep and the pigs, needed no less attention now that their owner wore a cassock and addressed his wife as *Papadia*.

159 793 648 722 Early in 1941 the Germans poured into Greece. For many months the mountain villages of Pindos, remote from the lines of communication, were scarcely affected by the occupation which, even at that period, brought such acute suffering and privation to the townsfolk and to the villages of the plains. As guerrilla activity became increasingly widespread, however, German and Italian troops were employed in a series of reprisal raids upon the undefended villages lying north and south of a road which connects the Thessalian plain with Epirus by way of the Metsovo pass.

One day early in November, 1943, several hundred soldiers descended

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upon Palaiochori. The people fled to the forest and watched helplessly while the invaders set fire to their homes and slaughtered their animals. When at length they withdrew the whole valley was shrouded in smoke: the incendiaries had done their work only too thoroughly. The church of St. Bessarion—the most prominent building in the village—had been amongst the first to be set on fire. When Papa Costas and a few companions ventured down from the mountainside to make a cautious reconnaissance they found nothing save the blackened walls and a great pile of charred timbers. The school, just below the parish church, was likewise completely gutted, and more than forty of the village's seventy-odd houses were irreparably damaged. The parsonage, a somewhat more substantial edifice than most of its neighbours—a monument to the professional skill of its builder—had resisted the first attempts of the incendiaries, and before the flames had thoroughly obtained a hold Papa Costas and his sons had come scrambling down from amongst the trees, and the building—though badly damaged—was not utterly destroyed. Amongst the smoking ruins of another cottage was found the body of an old woman who had been unable to make good her escape. Every animal in the village had been slaughtered.

After this catastrophe the people of Palaiochori took refuge in Kalambaka—already crammed with refugees from a score of similarly stricken villages—and there, in the shadow of the great rocks, they remained until 1945. In January and February of that year they went back to the village that had become a wilderness. During the first few months after their return home there was tremendous activity at the sawmill and in Papa Costas' workshop. No sooner had a sufficient number of cottages been rendered habitable than the parish priest turned his attention to the church. With the assistance of his elder son and a score of willing if unskilled helpers, the requisite timber was cut and shaped; and soon—though the church was without vestments and Papa Costas had with difficulty been able to procure copies of a few of the most indispensable liturgical books—there was at least a roof to the building and it was no longer necessary for the people to stand for long hours without protection against wind and snow whilst the holy mysteries were celebrated. Then the school was re-roofed, and as summer gave place to autumn the regular pattern of village life began to reassert itself—though Papa Costas no longer had twenty sheep and there were no more than three pack-animals available for the whole community.

But security was short-lived. The following year brought wandering

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bands of *andartai* and rumours of terrible deeds wrought in the darkness of long winter nights. In August, 1946, the parish priest of Palaiochori received warning that the Communists planned to murder him as a 'traitor'. Papa Costas fled for the second time within less than three years to Kalambaka. There, at the foot of the limestone cliffs crowned by the hermitages of the ascetics of Staghi, he built a little *kalyva*: a wooden cottage consisting of a single room and a large porch.

Before many months had passed, the whole village was back in the comparative security of Kalambaka, and the mountains were given over to the Accursed of God. Papa Costas and his family (all except Leonidas, who had gone off to the wars) settled down in their new house and the younger boy began to attend the overcrowded school. There were many other refugee clergy in the town: not from the diocese of Trikka and Staghi alone but also from many of the villages lying to the north and west of Kalambaka towards the *comopolis* of Grevena.

The second period of exile lasted until October, 1949. As a refugee priest, Papa Costas was entitled to a monthly stipend of 175,000 dr. (the equivalent of a little more than four pounds sterling) and the usual refugee rations of flour, sugar, etc.; but there was no ground to be tilled, no sheep or goats, no fees from baptisms or weddings to supplement the meagre wages of a 'fourth-class priest'. There was, however, some slight measure of security in Kalambaka, with its garrison and its communications, and Papa Costas' wife and daughter wove gaily coloured rugs, and adorned the little house with lace and tins of basil until any craftsman might have rejoiced in his handiwork.

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The defeat of the Communists at Florina early in 1949 marked the turning point in the seemingly interminable struggle against an enemy who, when defeated, could always withdraw beyond the northern frontiers of Greece to lick his wounds and build up his strength for another assault. During the summer months the wild region that lies to the westwards of Kalambaka was laboriously combed by units of the Greek army, and in October Papa Costas led the first party of returning refugees back to Palaiochori. His daughter and his younger son remained behind, however, in order that the boy might complete his studies at the high school, and it was in Kalambaka in January, 1950, that we first encountered our country parson.